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The creation of Cinderella from Basile to the Brothers Grimm

Cinderella is among the most cherished figures of the Western fairy-tale canon and "no other tale has so many early, independent, and widely scattered versions."[1] We speak of a "Cinderella moment," and her straightforward parable-like move from abuse and poverty to happiness and nobility is one of those seemingly spontaneous plots that in theory have always existed, even before they were told in various versions, as the Brothers Grimm held. In the late nineteenth century, students of comparative mythology read the story of Cinderella as the image of the dawn according to Indian Vedic myths. In his 1883 *History of Folk Tales*, the scholar Angelo de Gubernatis wrote: "The dawn walks ahead of the sun, but neither she touches him nor does he touch her. The sun follows her; she dances before him, but when they seem to get closer, they depart from each other. The Vedic dawn always flees on a luminous, extremely fast chariot, which the two celestial knights, the *dioscuri*, perhaps brothers of hers, lent her."[2] Moreover, the first recorded tale with distinct Cinderella motifs comes from ninth-century China, which seems to provide evidence for the universality of this tale.[3] An aura of sacredness surrounds this tale as well as some of the other "immortal" stories present in the final edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* published in 1857.

When we speak about Cinderella, we usually refer to a narrative type – that is, an abstract plot that derives from the interaction between Perrault's and the Brothers Grimm's literary versions, plus Walt Disney's film adaptation, as if the Cinderella tale had finally reached its clearest and purest form thanks to the merging of an abstract literary outline with an animated film.[4] The vast majority of twentieth-century retellings of Cinderella are based on this visual-verbal narrative type, which still holds a firm grip on the contemporary imagination. Given the increasing globalization of our culture, it is fair to say that the Perrault-Grimm-Disney type has imposed itself as the "correct" version of the Cinderella tale, even though the concept of a "correct" versus an "incorrect" retelling contradicts the fundamental tenet

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of folklore storytelling, which is based on a perpetual variation and transformation of all narrative formations. The basic motif itself of the Cinderella story (from rags to riches) may in fact take up radically different meanings according to the tale in which it appears.

In this regard, it is worth recalling what J. R. R. Tolkien wrote in his famous essay "On Fairy-Stories": "[Students of folk-lore] are inclined to say that any two stories that are built round the same folk-lore motive, or are made up of a generally similar combination of such motives, are 'the same stories.' . . . Statements of this kind may express (in undue abbreviation) some element of truth; but they are not true in a fairy-story sense . . . It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count."[5] Tolkien contests the facile identification of motif and tale, because each tale is in reality made of innumerable telling details that make it "unclassifiable." Given the centrality of the Finnish motif-based taxonomy in twentieth-century approaches to folk and fairy tales, Tolkien's statement is of immense relevance because it reminds us of the irreducible vitality of every oral and literary tale.

The first complete European version of the Cinderella story appeared in Giambattista Basile's *The Tale of Tales* (*Lo cunto de li cunti*, 1634–6), the first collection of literary fairy tales of the Western tradition.[6] Written in the Neapolitan dialect and reminiscent of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones* is divided into five days, each comprising ten tales. "The Cinderella Cat" is the sixth "entertainment" of the first day.[7] It tells the story of a widowed prince whose second wife is hostile to his daughter. The girl, called Zezolla, complains about her stepmother to her sewing teacher, who treats the girl with great care. Zezolla incessantly repeats: "Oh God, couldn't you be my little mommy, you who give me so many smooches and squeezes?" (84). The girl's insistence finally puts "a wasp in the teacher's ear." One day the teacher tells Zezolla that, if the girl follows her directions, she will soon become her new mother. Zezolla interrupts the teacher, who is about to give an inspired speech about the rosy future awaiting them, because the girl can't wait to hear the details of the teacher's wicked plan to get rid of her stepmother. Since the stepmother loves to see the girl wearing rags, Zezolla should ask her for an old dress kept in a chest in the storeroom. While she searches around in the chest, the girl must slam the lid on her stepmother's head and break her neck. Zezolla follows her teacher's suggestions and, after killing her stepmother, convinces her father to marry the cunning teacher, who turns out to be even more abusive than the first stepmother.

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It is worth remarking that the first Cinderella of the Western tradition, if we believe that Zezolla identifies with the Cinderella type known through the Grimms, uses her well-known abject appearance to get rid of the woman who has forced her into that pitiful role. The girl kills the stepmother while they are looking for a worn-out dress in a chest. Zezolla's teacher indeed stresses that the evil woman "likes to see you all patched up in rags." The Neapolitan girl not only defies her passive condition, which a post-Grimm view of Cinderella considers the trademark of her tale, she also commits a heinous crime for which she would deserve some harsh punishment, if we accept the idea that all fairy tales implicitly convey a moral message. But morality doesn't seem a major concern in *The Tale of Tales*. Although relevant scholarship has shown that deceit, dishonesty, and even murder are key elements of folk and fairy tales, a conventional view of this genre still holds onto the belief that a moral teaching is the Holy Grail of folk and fairy tales, even when, as in the case of Perrault, a clear disconnect is detectable between some of his tales and the moral commentaries in verses that follow them.

The Brothers Grimm were aware of the problematic nature of Basile's "The Cinderella Cat," as we can infer from their summary of this Neapolitan tale. In 1822, the Grimms published abridged versions in German of all fifty stories included in Basile's collection as an appendix to the second edition of their collection (1819). Jacob authored thirty-eight of these summaries. Wilhelm edited his brother's texts and worked on the remaining twelve Neapolitan tales.[8] After Felix Liebrecht published the first complete German translation of the Italian volume in 1846, the Grimms removed their adaptations of the Neapolitan stories from all subsequent editions of their seminal collection. The Grimms' editorial work on Basile is more complex than might appear at first glance. It is impossible to know Basile's work by reading the Grimms' adaptations, because the two German scholars did not limit themselves to outlining the Italian tales. They often edited out passages, modified endings, rewrote dialogue, and frequently added small but significant details to bring the seventeenth-century Italian stories closer to their view of a fairy tale.

In their 1822 appendix, the Grimms rewrote the beginning of "The Cinderella Cat" as follows: "A widower has a daughter, whom he loves dearly, and also a special governess. When he remarries, the girl complains to the governess about her stepmother who treats her harshly. 'Well, if I were your mother, I would love you like the apple of my eye.' 'Oh, please tell me what I should do.'"[9] By rewriting the dialogue between Zezolla and her teacher, the German scholars succeed in presenting the girl as a naïve character who will find in nature her provident supporter. They also shift the responsibility

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for the stepmother's murder from the girl to her teacher (in Basile, it is the girl who persuades the teacher to murder the stepmother).

Like Basile's "Cinderella Cat," Perrault's version, which came out in 1697 in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, ignores the girl's mother and opens with a marked emphasis on the moral drama that will soon unfold: "Once upon a time there was a gentleman who took the haughtiest and proudest woman in the world for his second wife."[10] Perrault's elaboration results from a distinct ideology and produces a tale that is only apparently close to the Grimms'. The French tale is particularly important because apart from Perrault's seminal rewriting of the Cinderella motif, most Cinderella tales were first collected in the nineteenth century, whose two initial decades saw a series of German tales that didn't fully develop the famous fairy tale and instead rehearsed a French-influenced prototype.[11] The contrast between Perrault's and the Grimms' Cinderella tale couldn't be starker. Echoing Basile's *The Tale of Tales*, the French tale begins with the evil second wife and makes no allusion to the deceased spouse, whereas the German story opens with the sentimental image of the pious mother who delivers a touching speech before passing away. The figures of the two opposite women respond to two distinct ideological goals. Perrault de-emphasizes the role of nature as the embodiment of a divine justice that guides the creation with an iron fist, according to a Protestant sensibility (the two white doves cold-bloodedly blind the two haughty sisters because they fall outside the realm of God's grace), and presents an all-too-human clash between a moral female behavior, which sees in meekness the supreme expression of a woman's identity, and an immoral one, based on the (unbecoming) assumption that a woman can be an active agent in society.

We could object that in Perrault's tale the godmother is a powerful and decisive woman, who plays a central role in the girl's destiny. It is important to note, however, two problematic aspects of this female figure. First, she is a good witch who knows the secrets of magic. Her intervention is a clear deformation in the natural order of things, as magic is meant to be. The godmother turns a pumpkin into a golden coach and mice into horses. Furthermore, the compassionate lady must compel nature to collaborate in her plan to send the weeping girl to the party. Whereas innumerable ants sort out the scattered legumes in the first trial imposed by Venus on Psyche in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* and gentle white doves perform the same task for the Grimms' Cinderella, Perrault's godmother must check the mousetrap to see if it contains any mice (451). Second, the lady's magical powers are at the service of someone else, as if she weren't allowed to use them for herself. She experiences transformation by proxy. Equally remarkable is the ending of the French tale. The two French sisters are not cursed by a Dantean *contrapasso*,

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according to which the souls in hell suffer a punishment resembling their sin or contrasting to it (the German stepsisters are blind to Cinderella's plight and thus blinded by the white doves); in Perrault they "recognized her as the beautiful person they had seen at the ball. They threw themselves at her feet begging her pardon," and their meek sister can't help but forgive them (453).

The differences between the two famous French and German versions of Cinderella are significant. One essential contrast is the role of religion. Although the Grimms aimed to emphasize the Christian undertone of their tales, especially in their final versions, the spiritual background of their storytelling is primarily based on a mixture of animism and Christianity.[12] As Saint Augustine underscores in *On the Care to Be Given to the Dead*, Christian theology firmly states that death severs every connection between the living and the deceased.[13] The deeply ill but concerned mother in the opening lines of the last version of the Grimms' Cinderella is a character missing from Basile's "Cinderella Cat," which instead presents two mean-spirited stepmothers. The absence of a caring mother reflects a seventeenth-century poetics according to which a hostile and blind fate rules over the world.[14] Writing during the height of German Romanticism, the Grimms grant a pivotal role to the spirit of the girl's deceased mother, who comes to be identified with the benevolence of nature, which cannot help but rescue the indigent and pious girl. The Grimms open their version with the bedridden mother who calls her daughter and reassures her of protection even after her death, but only if the girl behaves according to basic Christian precepts. It would be fair to state that, if we compare the Grimms' version with Basile's and Perrault's earlier retellings, we cannot help but see the dead mother as the main agent of the Grimms' tale. The expression "the mother's grave" recurs throughout the German tale as a leitmotif, because most of its magical events take place at that site. The German tale opens with the sentence: "The wife of a rich man fell ill one day," and proceeds to narrate a transformation that the dying mother had already foreseen. The Grimms' Cinderella is in essence a girl whose destiny is to turn into the mother who passes away at the beginning of the tale. She is presented as a wealthy and religious woman who instructs her daughter to follow in her footsteps and reassures her that she will support her in the difficult journey ahead.

In the first version of the Grimms' tale (1812), the mother's importance is even more explicit. A brief comparison between the 1812 (first edition of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*), 1819 (second edition), and 1857 (final edition) versions of the maternal speech is revealing. In 1812, the dying mother summons her daughter and says: "Dear child, I must leave you, but when I

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am in Heaven, I shall watch over you; plant a small tree on my grave and when you wish something, shake it and you shall have it, and when you are in distress, I shall send you help; just remain pious and good."[15] In 1819, the Grimms edit the lady's brief monologue as follows: "Remain pious and good, so that our dear Lord shall always stand by you and I shall watch over you from Heaven and care for you."[16] Finally, in the 1857 edition we read: "Dear child, if you are good and say your prayers faithfully, our dear Lord will always help you, and I shall look down from heaven and always be with you."[17] The 1812 version reveals the absolutely pivotal role that the mother will play in her daughter's transformation. It is in this early draft that the Grimms' intention is most evident. The mother makes her mutation into a plant explicit, given that the plant will feed on the soil in which she is buried. She, the mother, will grant whatever her daughter needs. The mother's warning about the importance of piety appears at the very end of her speech and does not seem to be indispensable for the girl's wellbeing. The fundamental change from the 1812 edition to the 1819 and 1857 ones gives the ill mother a more mysterious, less explicit role. The act of planting a tree on her grave becomes an action that nature itself inspires in the young girl, whose piety is spelled out in the 1857 version (she must pray regularly and sincerely). In the progressive editing of the opening lines of their Cinderella tale, the Grimms both weaken and reinforce the figure of the mother. Although in the 1812 version she is the unquestionable agent of her daughter's salvation and thus is presented as a powerful character, in the two later versions the mother transfers her power to God and also merges with the all-powerful energy of nature. As a woman, she is weak, but in the act of dissolving into nature she comes to identify with (a Christian) destiny.

Agency is a crucial problem in the Cinderella tale because the young girl's responsibility in her own transformation is questionable, and varies considerably from version to version. The concept itself of the so-called "Cinderella moment" is moot. If we bear in mind Tolkien's fundamental distinction between a motif and a tale, we must acknowledge that the opening and the unfolding of the various "Cinderellas" in fact announce significantly different tales and "each version should stand and be considered on its own, as well as for its relation to the 'cycle.'"[18] In the Grimms' seminal retelling, which, along with Perrault's version, influenced innumerable oral and literary versions, the main active move on Cinderella's part is to ask her father for the branch from a hazel bush, plant it on her mother's grave, and cry tears to water it. In Basile's version we find a similar scene, but one that grants the young girl a much stronger and more decisive character. When her father leaves on a business trip, Zezolla (the Cinderella Cat) asks him

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to give her regards to "the dove of the fairies" on the island of Sardinia, as a bird had suggested to her at her second stepmother's wedding (85). In the original Italian tale, Zezolla voices a menacing warning to her father: "If you forget, may you be unable to go forward or backward. Keep in mind what I say." Her father forgets about his daughter's request and his ship can't move from the port. When he finally remembers and travels to the cave of the fairies, a beautiful lady comes out of the grotto, thanks him for his daughter's kindness, and gives him four gifts for her: a date tree, a hoe, a golden pail, and a silk cloth. Instead of watering the branch planted in the ground next to her mother's grave with her tears as we read in the Grimms, the Neapolitan girl skillfully cultivates the date tree with the instruments received from the benevolent fairy. She sheds no tears.

In their adaptation of Basile's tale, the Grimms toned down Zezolla's forceful character and rewrote the father-daughter dialogue as follows: "He also asks Ash Kitten what she desires. She answers that he should greet the fairy's bird and ask it to send her something. 'But, please, do not forget,' she adds" (290). By significantly softening the girl's words, the Grimms make her resemble their own Cinderella, whose main activity is to cry her eyes out as if tears were the only appropriate response to the tragedy that has befallen her.

In the German tale, the stepmother twice subjects the girl to a seemingly meaningless trial. Echoing the first task that Venus imposes on Psyche in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, the wicked stepmother demands that Cinderella repeat the same task on two distinct occasions: "If you can pick out two bowls of lentils from the ashes in the next hour, then you can go" to the party.[19] Given that the stepmother disregards her promise even though two white doves followed by innumerable other kind birds take care of this apparently impossible task, we could conclude that this episode is a superfluous digression, which is *de facto* deleted from the popular Cinderella "type" resulting from the mingling of the Disney and Grimms retellings. In her important study of the Cinderella cycle, Anna Birgitta Rooth contends that this echo of the Psyche tale "appears in the Near Eastern, Eastern and Northern European traditions, but does not occur in the Italian and Iberian traditions"; its function is "to prevent the girl from going to the feast."[20] Thus, in Rooth's view it can be replaced by any other motif with a similar function. Rooth's claim is a cogent example of the widespread identification between type and actual tale. The international typology introduced by the Finnish school, which pigeonholes the infinite oral tales within well-defined categories, significantly de-emphasizes the uniqueness of any given tale.[21] The motif reminiscent of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* in reality indicates a process of differentiation, distinction, and separation (the girl has to sort

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out different kinds of legumes), and thus describes the heroine's journey toward adulthood.[22] However, when applied to the specific Grimms' tale, it acquires additional narrative meanings. If we keep in mind that the Grimms posit a crucial identification between the dead mother and nature, we can't help but see the two white doves as the symbol of that natural and divine justice that rewards the girl. Finally embodying her deceased mother, the girl harshly punishes the two insensitive stepsisters. Three is a magical number in the fairy-tale genre, and the two doves perform three similar actions: they peck the lentils out of the ashes twice and finally peck the stepsisters' eyes at the end of the tale. As Psyche is powerless without the spontaneous interventions of nature and Cupid, so the Grimms' Cinderella becomes the passive spectator of her own salvation, written in the natural law of divine justice.

Through a brief analysis of the first three major literary tales revolving around a Cinderella-like figure we have noticed that the narrative context and the ideological background of each tale brings to the fore significantly different connotations to the point of undermining the reassuring view of an "eternal" and immutable Cinderella whose parable is only marginally modified by the historical conditions in which a given tale arises. Doubting the intrinsic constituent of Cinderella could be seen as an affront to a well-established critical tradition. The renowned Freudian folklorist Alan Dundes offers a clear summary of our received idea of Cinderella. In *Folklore Matters* he contends that in a fairy tale "self-identity is tied to group recognition of identity. Cinderella, the household drudge who sits, dirty and disfigured, by the hearth, is the same person as the dazzlingly beautiful belle of the ball, but it is only when the outside world realizes this fact that the tale's dénouement, her happy marriage, can be achieved."[23] But let us take, for example, the Milanese "Cinderella" ("Cenerentola"), a post-Grimms oral version of the tale, which we find in *Milanese Tales* (*La novellaja milanesa*, 1872), an anthology of oral tales collected by the influential Italian scholar and writer Vittorio Imbriani (1840–86), whose novellas and short stories were deeply influenced by the work of Clemens Brentano (1778–1842). Brentano played a fundamental role in the development of the Grimms' interest in folk narratives.

The late nineteenth-century Milanese story – which Imbriani transcribed short-hand with no editorial touch-up, in direct contrast with the Grimms' approach – opens with a father who must leave his three daughters to go on a business trip. Reminiscent of Basile's "Cinderella Cat" but also of Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," the father asks the three girls to choose a gift they would like to receive on his return. Whereas the first two daughters desire fancy clothes, the youngest one, called

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Cinderella "because she was always by the fire," only asks for a bird.[24] When he returns, the father (who works for the local court) and his three daughters receive an invitation from the king to attend his three royal balls. Even though her sisters insist that she attend the party, Cinderella refuses to go with her family: "Shut up! . . . I am happy this way" ("Chetatevi! . . . Io son contenta così"). Even though Cinderella doesn't have the appropriate attire, her two older sisters are convinced that together they can "come up with something" for her to wear (152). Their father cuts in and tells his two daughters to leave Cinderella alone; she is free not to go to the party. But as soon as they are gone, Cinderella calls to the bird: "Make me more beautiful than I am!" When she arrives at the king's palace her beauty is "blinding." After dancing with the awestruck king, the girl becomes tired and decides to go back home. She jumps in her coach and throws money to the king's servants who are following her to find out where she lives. She rushes up the stairs of her father's palace and tells the bird: "Make me uglier than I am!"

The Milanese Cinderella does not endure humiliation and abuse because of her evil sisters, who instead would like her to go with them to the ball. This Milanese girl knows that to make a lasting impression a lady is supposed to arrive at a party as late as possible and alone. Cinderella makes her entrance when the other guests are already enjoying the company of the royal family. She is the only one with the gall to arrive late at the king's party! If the Cinderella motif is inextricably linked to the rags-to-riches idea, how do we interpret this tale? Or should we redefine the received concept of Cinderella? Instead of a rags-to-riches character should we speak of a girl who, unbeknownst to her father and sisters, succeeds in becoming a king's wife? This Italian tale is only one of countless examples of an oral story in which a set of clearly recognizable motifs fails to create a conventional narrative structure. In twentieth-century Western culture, innumerable literary and visual interpretations strove to subvert the problematic ideological message conveyed by the handful of literary tales that had acquired the status of "classical" narratives – that is, immutable, pure, and unchangeable stories. Twentieth-century approaches to fairy tales were essentially parodic. "Parody," Simon Dentith points out, "includes any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice."[25] It is essential to bear in mind, however, that parody has also the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the power of the referential "cultural production" that it intends to attack. In other words, all modern parodies of Cinderella are based on the conscious or unconscious premise that the Cinderella type as we know it deserves its position of superiority. The Milanese oral version transcribed by Imbriani is not a self-conscious

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and polemical retelling; it plays with well-known motifs (the two older sisters versus the youngest sibling; the magical bird; the royal ball; the rushed disappearance; the lost shoe) without assembling them in the order and with the meaning we have come to expect.

According to our present cultural expectations, Imbriani's tale is "incorrect" also because it doesn't transmit a clear moral message. As Louis Vax reminds us, "fairy tale" does not necessarily equal "moral tale."[26] Although several well-known oral and literary tales celebrate ingenuity and slyness rather than piety and honesty, morality has been widely accepted as a fundamental goal of the fairy-tale genre. Contrary to this received idea, cunning is the central aspect of the Milanese oral tale, in which Cinderella doesn't deserve to be rewarded for moral reasons because nobody has abused her.

To a significant extent, our contemporary clinging to "classical" tales is also the product of a cultural conformity that struggles to free itself from a past narrative that doesn't concern us any longer. In her introduction to *The Fairies Return, or New Tales for Old* (first edition 1934), Maria Tatar rightly emphasizes that "both satire and fairy tale are driven by a lack, by a sense that something vital is missing."[27] Our parodic retellings (in films, graphic novels, children's books, erotica, etc.) do not help us move beyond the fossilized classics of nineteenth-century Western Europe; they reinforce their "inevitability." What is missing from parody and fairy tale today is that sense of unbridled wonder that used to be associated with this oral and literary genre. "Fairy tale," the linguist Claudio Marazzini rightly contends, "is not as vital as it used to be in an archaic society dominated by oral transmission."[28] In his view, "when its audience became limited to children the decadence of this genre began."[29] We can detect a cause-effect connection between fairy tales exclusively as children's literature and its present conventionality, which includes the seemingly innovative retellings that "subvert," "undermine," or "question," as critics like to say, the classical fairy tales. Cinderella is probably, along with Sleeping Beauty, the highest expression of this repetitious format.

Two additional points must be borne in mind. First, the fact that a tale resembling the Cinderella transmitted by Perrault and the Grimms existed in ninth-century China and in Basile's *The Tale of Tales* does not necessarily mean that this tale (or better yet, "type") had the same cultural power that our modern conventional Cinderella has possessed for the last few centuries, especially starting from the nineteenth century. Nothing allows us to think that Basile's "The Cinderella Cat" enjoyed a prominent status, since this seminal collection abounds with unforgettable tales in which young girls are exactly the opposite of the Grimms' female meek prototype. Basile's heroines

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are often feisty and astute, and in most tales they do not need a prince to help them out of a difficult situation. In the tale "The Three Crowns," for instance, a young princess wakes up three sleeping beauties whose mother had magically put them to sleep to protect them from a grim future, unless a princess (not a prince) would come and wake them up.

Second, in analyzing any oral or literary tale, we should pay close attention to all those elements that we have erroneously learned to see as secondary and disposable. In other words, contemporary readers of folk and fairy tales find in ancient versions what they wish to find – that is, the confirmation that "our" Cinderella is an improved version of the ninth-century Chinese or seventeenth-century Neapolitan one – and discard the "dross" of the tale. The celebrated Chinese tale (titled "Yeh-hsien") seems at once astonishingly similar to and irremediably distinct from the modern Perrault-Grimm-Disney outline.

A brief summary will be helpful. The Chinese tale opens as follows: "Among the people of the south there is a tradition that before the Ch'in and Han dynasties there was a cave-master called Wu. The aborigines called the place the Wu cave. He married two wives. One wife died."[30] When her husband passes away, the second wife begins to mistreat the stepdaughter Yeh-hsien. One of the tasks she imposes on the good girl is to draw water from deep pools. "She once got a fish two inches long," the tale goes on, and she put it into a bowl, but it grew so big that no bowl could contain it. She thus "threw it into the back pond" and fed it regularly. Dressed as her daughter, the stepmother goes to the pond, calls the fish up, stabs it with a knife, and cooks it. When she realizes what has happened, the girl sobs desperately, but a man descending from the sky tells her that her stepmother has hidden the fish's bones under a dunghill. If she hides them in her room and prays to them, all her wishes will be granted. Yeh-hsien receives pearls, food, and elegant dresses. For the traditional cave festival, after her stepmother and stepsister leave, the girl wears "a cloak of stuff spun from kingfisher feathers and shoes of gold" (19). When her stepsister recognizes her, she runs away but loses one of her golden shoes, which one of the cave people picks up and then sells in the kingdom of T'o-han, an island close to the cave. The ruler of this realm finally gets hold of the precious shoe and decides to find its original owner. When the young girl tries it on, it becomes evident that the shoe belongs to her. The ruler marries her and also gets the magical fish's bones. Soon afterwards, "flying stones" hit and kill the stepmother and stepsister, and the cave people feel so sorry for them that they bury them "in a stone-pit, which was called the Tomb of the Distressed Women. The men of the cave made mating-offerings there; any girl they prayed for there, they got" (20). The king who had married Yeh-hsien is

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very greedy and demands innumerable gifts from the fish's bones. "Next year, there was no response, so the king buried the fish-bones on the seashores," and he marks the place with gold. During a mutiny, some soldiers open the hiding place and one night they (the bones) were "washed away by the tide."

Readers of the Cinderella "cycle" identify this tale as the original Cinderella story. Is this really the case? We might claim that the main focus of the tale is less the good girl than the magical fish, another well-known figure of Western folk and fairy tales. Remember, for example, the Brothers Grimm's "The Fisherman and His Wife," which tells the story of a poor fisherman who one day pulls up a magical flounder. Similar to what we read in the ancient Chinese tale, the fisherman's greedy wife abuses the fish's generosity. In the Chinese story, the fish appears in conjunction with the girl's first deed in the tale (she must fetch water from a deep pool) and whose disappearance marks the ending of the tale. The tale opens with a magical appearance and closes with its exhaustion due to the king's greed. A magical animal is present in Basile's and the Grimms' tales as well, but in this ancient Chinese tale the animal stands at the very center of the story. It is also worth remarking on the significant role of the stepmother and stepsister, whose grave becomes a holy place of pilgrimage. The Chinese girl's happy ending doesn't coincide with the ending of the tale. Three major transformations take place, and Yeh-hsien's is only the first, and not even the most spectacular one. The stepmother and stepsister, whose sudden death is mourned by the cave people, rest forever in the Tomb of the Distressed Women, in order to commemorate their own plight in this tale. The last transformation concerns the fish's bones, which first reveal the girl's husband's lack of modesty (he is not the Prince Charming of our tradition) and then dissolve into the sea, the fish's original element.

According to Rooth's analysis of the Cinderella cycle, this famous narrative type can be divided into two main kinds: Type A revolves around an evil stepmother; Type B concerns a father's incestuous desire for his daughter. An additional third type, C, regards a male Cinderella tormented by a wicked stepmother, even though this third variation is primarily present in the Balkan, Irish, and Scandinavian traditions.[31] One cannot help but note, however, that with the end of oral transmission of magic tales the above subdivision has acquired a distinctly archaeological flavor. Contemporary visual and literary retellings of Cinderella (especially film and television versions) appear as contrived and forced attempts to rejuvenate a literary fossil.[32] The extremely rare cases of a successful "restoration" are works that either leave the referential model behind as a fading cultural memory or transform it from within.

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I will limit myself to two opposite, but in my view equally masterful, manipulations of the Cinderella tale. In "Tale of the Shoe," the first story of *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997), Emma Donoghue presents a Cinderella who has internalized the abusive setting of the classical tale, which becomes a faint literary echo in the protagonist's and the reader's mind. The tale opens as follows: "Until she came it was all cold. Ever since my mother died the feather bed felt hard as a stone floor . . . I scrubbed and swept because there was nothing else to do . . . Nobody made me do the things I did, nobody scolded me, nobody punished me, but me. The shrill voices were all inside."[33] Reminiscent of Anne Sexton's seminal poetic rewritings in *Transformations* (1971), the main character of Donoghue's tale insists that "nobody" (no stepmother) abused her; her despondent condition derived from her mourning her mother's death. The nagging voices in the traditional tale (the stepmother and stepsisters), the girl repeats, "were all inside." It is also relevant to note that the girl narrates her own story in the past tense, making its events even more remote. No names are given, and the figure of the godmother from Perrault's version is "the stranger" who one day appears behind the protagonist and triggers in her a feeling of magical renewal: "How can I begin to describe the transformations?" the girl asks (3). The mysterious woman, who was old enough to be the girl's mother and had indeed known her, did have magical powers, but her magic was the all-too-human love feeling that she triggered in the girl.

In his theatrical work *La gatta cenerentola* (*The Cinderella Cat*, 1976), the composer and ethnomusicologist Roberto De Simone offers a magnificent reinterpretation of Basile's tale not by subverting his source, but rather by turning the well-known story into a large fresco of seventeenth-century Neapolitan culture. An immense success in Italy, this multifaceted work in Neapolitan dialect (a mélange of melodrama, *opera buffa*, and seventeenth-century Neapolitan popular songs) transforms the city of Naples into the real protagonist of its *mise-en-scène*. "When I started thinking about *The Cinderella Cat*," De Simone writes, "I immediately thought of a melodrama: a new and ancient melodrama as new and ancient are fairy tales in the moment we narrate them."[34] De Simone's work is a masterpiece of cultural archaeology. Basile's fairies become the so-called "munacielli," familiar spirits typical of Neapolitan folklore; Catholicism converses with local superstitious beliefs; the seventeenth-century city of Naples is dominated by the Spanish army; and Cinderella ("grey like a cat") first appears holding a broom and a rag in a large and forlorn room, resentfully singing: "Some are born naked and some with a shirt / I was born naked and with nothing" (Act 1, page 15). No teacher suggests that she kill her manipulative stepmother; the girl,

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living in a hostile and miserable time, willfully tries and fails to murder her.

To speak about Cinderella in the first decades of the new millennium demands that we face a still uncharted field of narrative restlessness and cultural conformity. Contemporary popular culture presents a variety of trite and unchallenging approaches to the "sacred" Perrault-Grimm-Disney tale. Along with film adaptations that transfer the clichéd narrative skeleton to contemporary times (for instance, *Pretty Woman*, *Maid in Manhattan*, or *Princess Diaries*), this classical tale is also dissected into single tropes, such as the lost shoe or the figure of the benign godmother, as if the Cinderella narrative mechanism had ceased to work and only single pieces of it could still be put to use. These loose tropes have a pervasive presence in current popular culture, from television programs (from *Sex and the City* to *American Idol*) to sporting events, wherever a reference to the Cinderella type is applicable.

A third technique is to compose new stories set in contemporary times (and in particular, contemporary America) in which innumerable well-known characters of classical fairy tales interact with each other. See, for example, the graphic novel *Fables*, published in several installments, that recounts the vicissitudes of Snow White, Prince Charming, Beauty and the Beast, Pinocchio, and Cinderella, among many others, who live incognito in "Fabletown," a secret community in New York City. They have become an endangered species that strives to protect itself from humans and mysterious forces of evil. This narrative strategy is reminiscent of the postclassical Alexandrian culture, which tried to achieve some form of originality by mixing up previous illustrious texts and genres. Inspired by the amusing young-adult books *The Sisters Grimm*, the dull television series *Once Upon a Time* also revolves around a small town community. The inhabitants of this isolated place are characters from famous fairy tales, including Cinderella. Unaware of their real identities, they cannot leave the small town because of a spell cast by the evil queen from the Snow White tale. We could interpret this narrative device (an enclosed space that keeps Cinderella and other major fairy-tale figures distant from the rest of the world) as the symbolic representation of a transitional time, in which old and formulaic narratives resist their inevitable transformation.

NOTES

1 Archer Taylor, "The Study of the Cinderella Cycle," in Alan Dundes, ed., *Cinderella: A Folklore Casebook* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), 115–28: 117.

2 Angelo de Gubernatis, *Storia delle novelline popolari* (Milan: Hoepli, 1883), 13.

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3 See Neil Philip, *The Cinderella Story* (New York: Penguin Folklore Library, 1989), 17–18.
4 Jack Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy-Tale Films* (New York: Routledge, 2011), Kindle edition, location 700: "Walt Disney . . . became king of the fairy-tale film in the twentieth century, and though dead, his ghost still sits on the throne and rules the realm."
5 J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 33–90: 45–6.
6 For a brief introduction to Basile, see Nancy Canepa, "Basile, Giambattista (1575–1632)," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, vol. I, ed. Donald Haase (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 99–101.
7 Giambattista Basile, *Lo cunto de li cunte*, ed. Michele Rak (Milan: Garzanti, 1998), 124–37. I quote from the most recent English translation: Giambattista Basile, *The Tale of Tales, or Entertainment for the Little Ones*, trans. Nancy Canepa (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 83–9. Further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
8 Heinz Rölleke, *Die Märchen der Brüder Grimm: Eine Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2004), 14–15.
9 "Aschenkätzchen," in *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm. Dritter Band* (Berlin: Reimer, 1822), 289–92: 289. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
10 Charles Perrault, "Cinderella; or, the Glass Slipper," in *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 449–54: 449. Further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
11 Hans-Jörg Uther, "Aschenputtel," in *Handbuch zu den "Kinder- und Hausmärchen" der Brüder Grimm* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 50–5: 50–1.
12 On Cinderella's moral and possibly religious message, see Wilhelm Solms, *Die Moral von Grimms Märchen* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1999), 9–17 and 175–92. In particular, Solms holds that the punishment of the two wicked sisters reflects a "naïve morality" rather than an actual Christian mindset (10). As far as the overall message of the Grimms' book, Solms distinguishes among several different categories of religiosity (tales in which God is invoked; tales in which God is treated as example of the fairy tale's morality; tales with an explicitly Christian content; tales with a shamanic flavor; etc.). See also Heinz Rölleke, "Das Bild Gottes in den Märchen der Brüder Grimm," in *Die Märchen der Brüder Grimm: Quellen und Studien* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2004), 184–95. In *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), G. Ronald Murphy, S. J., contends that Wilhelm Grimm was not just a "moralizing type"; he was more "a private, mystic soul" (14).
13 Saint Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, in *Patrologia latina*, vol. XL (Paris: Garnier, 1887), 591–610. Cf. my *In the Company of Demons* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 97.
14 Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1994), 132.
15 "Aschenputtel" (1812–15), in *Die ursprünglichen Märchen der Brüder Grimm*, ed. Kurt Derungs (Bern: Edition amalia, 1999), 79–85: 79–80.
16 "Aschenputtel" (1819), in *Die wahren Märchen der Brüder Grimm*, ed. Heinz Rölleke (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003), 119–26: 119.

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17 "Cinderella," in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, ed. Maria Tatar (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 115–27: 115–16.
18 Philip, *The Cinderella Story*, 4.
19 "Cinderella," in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, 121. Cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, vol. I, ed. Arthur Hanson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), book 6, 329.
20 Anna Birgitta Rooth, *The Cinderella Cycle* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1951), 176.
21 Cf. Nicole Belmont, *Mythe, conte et enfance* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 219.
22 *Ibid.*, 235–6.
23 Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 22.
24 Vittorio Imbriani, "Cenerentola," in *La novellaja milanesa: Ristampa accresciuta di molte novelle inedite, di numerosi riscontri e di note e della Novellaja Fiorentina* (Livorno: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1976; facsimile of 1877 edition), 151–7: 151.
25 Simon Dentith, *Parody* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Kindle edition, location 261.
26 Louis Vax, "Les Genres de la littérature orale," in *Formes du récit dans la première moitié du XIXe siècle. Grimm-Brentano-La Motte Fouqué* (Paris: Éditions du temps, 2001), 184–222: 205.
27 Maria Tatar, "Introduction," in *The Fairies Return, or New Tales for Old*, comp. Peter Davies (Princeton University Press, 2012), 1–36: 6.
28 Claudio Marazzini, *Le fiabe* (Rome: Carocci, 2004), 27.
29 *Ibid.*
30 Philip, "Yeh-hsien," in *The Cinderella Story*, 18–20: 18. Philip reprints the translation present in Arthur Waley, "The Chinese Cinderella Story," *Folk-Lore* 58 (London: The Folklore Society, 1947), 226–38. For a basic introduction to its author, see pages 226–7. Further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
31 Rooth, *The Cinderella Cycle*, 134–5.
32 Cf. Carolina Fernández-Rodríguez, "Cinderella Films," in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales*, vol. I, 205–9.
33 Emma Donoghue, "Tale of the Shoe," in *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (New York: HarperTeen, 1999), 1–2. Further references will be given as page numbers in the text.
34 Roberto De Simone, "Presentazione 1976," in *La gatta cenerentola* (Turin: Einaudi, 1999), v–vii: v. Further references will be given as page numbers in the text.

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